CHAPTER SIX

THE social life which my parents led with other families in the district towns was shared by us and all the other children. Burmese children do not live in a child's world cut off from reality—there is no specially created world for them like that of J. M. Barrie—they are given enough food for their wildest imagination, but this feeds equally the grandmother and nurses who tell them stories. No special children's parties with cakes and games for them are provided; they go everywhere with the grown-ups, on visits, excursions and festivals, they eat and sleep in the same rooms as the elders and hear most of the conversation. One result is to make Burmese children more conscious of family ties and responsibilities, and to prepare them better for any calamities that may befall them in adolescence or any time before they are fully grown up. Yet no one who sees Burmese children can doubt that delight, wonder and pure joy are present in their lives.

All Burmese social gatherings centre round either religious observances or eating. We are still unsophisticated enough to have the same way of enjoying ourselves whether in city or country, and for that reason these district towns formed such a perfect background for happy days. In the towns that I remember, a river ran through, with sandbanks at edges or in midstream; this, with the monasteries and pagoda precincts a little way out of the busy quarters, private garden orchards and the houses of friends, provided the background for all the social life which my parents had. and is the reason why Burmese people never form social clubs. Most of the officials went to play tennis at the Gymkhana club with European members, but it had no real part in their lives.

When we went on *pyaw-pwè-sas*, happy-eating-gatherings, at pagodas, with two or three other families, the grown-ups, including aunts and dependents of the families, made elaborate food arrangements because the joy of the occasion was to cook on a large-scale in the open air. They took pots, dishes, food and washing apparatus for about twenty people. We started with silent recitation of prayers before the golden spire in the cool morning air, holding silver lilies between folded hands and being so careful not to breathe in the fragrance of the flowers, because my mother taught us that we should not first enjoy the beauty of flowers which are to be offered. When our short prayers were through, we stuck the flowers in a vase or niche at the pagoda base, lighted a row of candles

If the umbrella falls down it indicates that the spirit has departed and cannot return. The person who performs this ritual must not talk to anyone en route to the cemetery. 764

On the seventh day a ceremony takes place. The monks come to the house to eat and chant prayers. They are given offerings for their own use and a special tray containing white thread. The monks hold the thread, which symbolizes good, while they chant. The people present are seated before the monks, repeating the prayers and precepts after them. The deceased person is supposed to be sitting on the mat prepared for him and benefiting from this ceremony. Then the people are fed, the monks depart, and the influences of death are considered to be banished. The thread is kept in the house. 764 769

Graves are not visited, nor is there any upkeep of the cemetery, for folk belief has it that the tidying of graves will cause more people to die. The dead are commemorated by the meritorious act of feasting the Buddhist monks.

Associations

Bus Union. Owners of buses plying between Tadagale and Rangoon are organized into a union. In terms of its functions, this organization might be more fittingly termed a mutual protective and insurance association. These are: to prevent outsiders from infringing on their route and competing with them; payment of damages in case of accidents between members' buses and other vehicles or persons; payment of any costs of litigation that arise in connection with accidents; and maintenance of a repair shop and mechanic in the village. Members of the union pay an initial sum to join, plus monthly dues and a small toll fee for each trip that is made. 441 494

Peasants Union. The Tadagale Peasants Union is a constituent body of the All Burma Peasants Union and operates directly under the Insein Division of the parent organization. Some fifty to sixty households in Tadagale are members. When the head of a family or household joins, the union regards all its members as union members. In theory, meetings are supposed to occur once a month, but in fact take place at irregular intervals, whenever a problem arises that is considered sufficiently important to warrant a meeting. Commonly this is a dispute between members over land. If opinion remains divided after considerable discussion of a dispute or other issue, the union meeting votes by written ballot. 467 427 185

The more long-run aims of the Peasants Union concern rent and taxes of cultivators. Protests and petitions are sent to the government when it is felt taxes are too high. The union was characterized as 'an organization that is against the landlords.' At the time of our research, its aim was to reduce the landowners' share of the produce to one-third from two-thirds. The union also favored land nationalization, under which it was believed rent would be paid in a just amount to the government. Just where the Peasants Union fitted in with existing political party programs and alignments in the country at large was not, for various reasons, feasible to investigate.

Ceremonial Assistance Groups. For purposes of rendering help at such ceremonies as weddings, funerals and initiations, the villagers are divided into informal groups. These are: men's group; married women's group; and unmarried girls' group. The men's group does the heavier tasks, such as chopping and carrying firewood, erecting ceremonial structures, and preparing 575 476

14: Brant E-5 (1949-50) 1954 AP1 Burma
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large amounts of food. The married women prepare food, serve, and entertain the guests, while the unmarried girls assist them. If a ceremony involves a procession, the unmarried girls bear the gifts which are invariably taken to the monks on such occasions.

These 'groups' are so informal and loosely organized that in the strict sociological sense they should not be so designated; rather, they are simply the conventional lines along which cooperation takes place and labor is divided, in a spirit of mutual aid, whenever a family sponsors a ceremony -- an occasion involving much work. Each is willing to help, for when his own family sponsors an event, similar assistance will be expected and forthcoming.

Education. In addition to the Buddhist monastic schools, to be discussed in the next chapter, there is a small secular school in the village. This is operated on a voluntary basis by a middle-aged schoolmaster, a widower, who migrated, together with his daughter, to Tadagale two years ago. It is his hope that eventually the school will be incorporated into the regular school system, as compulsory education is gradually extended to the country. The school is financed wholly by voluntary contributions. The village headman personally contributes ten rupees per month, his brother gives a like amount, and the Bus Union donates five rupees. From this income of twenty-five rupees per month ($5.25) the schoolmaster pays five rupees for his house rent and provides blackboard chalk and his own books and pencils. On what remains, plus a little profit he derives from maintaining a small shop in his house, he must support his daughter and himself. But he is confident that once compulsory education is extended to Tadagale, his sacrificial efforts of the present will be rewarded by a regular appointment at Rs. 100 per month, an expanded program of instruction, and perhaps the services of an assistant. For the present he operates the school without any responsibilities to superiors, devising his own curriculum and teaching according to his own methods. The schoolmaster was himself once a student at a normal school in Moulmein.

About eighty children attend the school with varying degrees of regularity. The average daily attendance is about sixty. The schoolmaster feels that many more children of school-age living in the community should attend, but finds that parents are reluctant to send their children. Some feel they are needed for household and field labor; others prefer what they regard as the stricter environment of the monastic school, with its great emphasis upon religion and correct conduct. The schoolmaster deplores the ignorance and negative attitudes of villagers concerning education, and their unwillingness to contribute financially to the maintenance of his school.

Instruction is given in five grades or 'standards' as they are called in Burma. These are termed 1B, 1A, 2, 3, and 4.

Standard 1B is equivalent to the kindergarten of the pre-World War II schools. The schoolmaster has divided the class into two sections, one for the children of seven to eight years who already can read to some extent, the other for the younger ones of four to six who cannot. According to the rules of the government schools six years is the minimum school age, but the schoolmaster in Tadagale is not bound by such regulations. He teaches these two groups of kindergarteners according to their own levels and at the pace which he thinks appropriate. They learn the alphabet and simple numbers at first, later moving on to reading and spelling. No regular allocation of time to different subjects is possible, since the schoolmaster must teach this and four other classes without any assistance.

of clothes. The old people take care to save the torn garments for use in wiping the hands after meals, for handling hot pots on the stove and the like. 291 554 181

There are three classes of clothing (1) working clothes (2) festive dress, and (3) religious dress. The working clothes consist of the cheaper and less ornate fabrics and are mainly of cotton. The men usually bind the longyi around the loins by looping the shirt in a band between the legs. Htamain (women's longyi) waist band is secured under the armpits when bathing. 291 292

While walking in the rain the longyis are also raised to prevent them from becoming wet. Festive dress involves the best which one has, usually silks and are worn on the Sabbath days and at special social occasions as the SHIN BYA and other ceremonies. Religious dress is worn constantly by Pongyis (orange robes), nuns (peach coloured) and frequently by old men (white) and old women (light chocolate coloured). On Sabbath days the particularly religious individuals of all ages, especially those belonging to Buddhist lay societies, wear religious dress. 291 779 [575]●

The term LONGYI means "lower apparel" and is applied to both men's (PUSO) and women's (HTAMEIN). The men's festive longyi TAUNG-SHAY-PUSO (taung measurement- twenty-puso) worn frequently in the past and now reserved for special occasions was a double silk PUSO 8 yards long. A special method of securing this garment about the waist results in GABON ZA ("Sticking out piece") a fold which protrudes 6 or more inches in the midline - only, however, when the silk is crisp and stiff (new and/or finest heavy quality). This is regarded as a very manly garment. Two styles of APAW KINGYI (over jacket) men's jacket are worn. The "Peking" type meeting at the mid-line is most common. A "Cantonese" type buttons over like the women's jacket at the side. 291 292

Formerly every young man had tattooed thighs, extending in a solid band of decoration from a few inches above the knees to the hips. The motifs were frequently nat symbols. The main purpose was to display manliness and courage since the process of tattooing, done with a 3 pronged fork dipped in pigment was extremely painful. 304 562 178

length) draped over one shoulder. The PUMA, part of the scarf, still draped, is placed on front of the worshipping woman for her head and hands as she bows. The beads, a string about 2 feet long made of black lacquer or of red or white beads about ½ inch in diametre are called SEIK-PA-DEE (count-beads). They are worn about the neck when not in use, and are "counted" by the fingers of one hand. Each bead, thus counted calls to the worshipper's mind a vision of Buddha as she says ARA HAHN (God) in a low voice. While in this dress women do not decorate their hair with flowers or wear jewelry or cosmetiques as such would be unseemly. 792 291 293 [788]

The older men and other religious men (who are gathering alms as members of Buddhist lay societies) wear a loose white robe over a white jacket, white head band, praying bead necklace, and a chocolate coloured scarf draped over one shoulder. The general public must wear their very best clothes for religious festivals but the women do not use cosmetiques. "Rangoon Sabbath" is the term applied to the less strict observations of the town people who may appear with a little THANAKA or other cosmetiques. The marriage dress of the bride is an older form of costume involving use of a long split skirt with cut-flaring jackets. 888 779 575 291 [369] [779] [292] [585]

The hair styles are important and denote age and sex. Children of both sexes wear their hair in a knot at the top of the head with a fringe of short hair like a bowl below. The older men's style was long hair knotted on one side in the back of the head; except in villages this has been superseded by the western short crop ranging from a long "Pompador" to short "crew cuts" - the latter being rarer and more modern. Old men wear very short cropped hair or are shaven - as the Pongyis and nuns. Maidens wear their hair in elaborately woven tresses - earlier on top of the head in a disc-shell - now in chain braids at the back of the head. False switches of hair are commonly used. Flowers are used as decoration on all occasions. The usual style for married ladies is a knot at the back of the head wound around a rectangular comb of wood, (common) tortoise shell, ivory or gold. Older and married women sometimes appear in an ancient ceremonial style consisting of the hair wrapped around a fiber cylinder 302 177 369

Basic Burmese Concepts of Health and Sickness.

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The Burmese regard health as the best of all earthly blessings. Although Buddha referred to the living body as a decaying corpse, which it was folly to feed, he recognized the necessity for bodily health in order to carry out the all-important mental activities connected with the Buddhist religion. It is then essential for each person to be as physically and mentally sound as he is able. The forces governing health and sickness are both supernatural and natural each with its own set of medical specialists. The specialists are called for only when the case is far advanced there being an extensive lore of home precautions and curative practices. In general, disorders caused by nats and ghosts (supernatural) or magic are recognized by their sudden, catastrophic or otherwise unusual nature, and are both instigated and cured by magical means. The natural disorders are caused by weaknesses in the constitution of the patient, foreign bodies, dangerous foods and such-like means, and are cured through knowledge of medical principles. The germ concept of disease is completely lacking, although when foreign matter is seen, as mosquito larvae in water, it is frequently regarded as unhealthy. The western idea of omnipresent harmful bacteria is regarded as fantastic in being contrary to observation - "our ancestors have lived for countless generations in these surroundings which you regard as dangerous", they will say. There are some 80 different kinds of PO MYOSHA or harmful ingredients that can infect the body. These range from undesirable ingredients in food to mystical influences that rise in the teeth to cause tooth-ache. The cleanliness of the Burmese, as seen in their several daily baths and emphasis on clean clothes, is not out of regard for "hygenic" reasons, but rather for social reasons. One must look his best in public so as not to give offense to the eye or nose. The sick person is never washed since cold water would have the affect of driving the fever-heat inward to a fatal degree. The data for resumption of bathing for the convalescent is carefully considered; mistakes can result in relapse and death. Cool breezes must be avoided by the sick person for similar reasons. The house doors closed during the day invariably mean sickness within.

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